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DEFENDING RIGHTS OF
ESSENTIAL CAREGIVERS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from New York (Ms. TENNEY) for 5 minutes.

Ms. TENNEY. Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed so many vulnerabilities in our communities, our economy, and our healthcare system. None of us were prepared for the endless virtual meetings, school closings, and weeks spent in quarantine. Nor could we have been ready for the tragic loss of our neighbors and loved ones who were living in long-term care facilities across the Nation.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today about the grave impact the negligent policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic had on the most vulnerable in our communities.

Over the past nearly 2 years, we watched our grandparents in nursing homes and our family and friends in group homes struggling to maintain their health, dignity, and will to go on as they were left without the care and attention they deserved over long periods of isolation.

When I was sworn in to serve in the 117th Congress, one of the first bills I introduced was the bipartisan Essential Caregivers Act. This bill is a critical step to ensure that residents of long-term care facilities are not left to suffer in isolation during this or any future public health emergency.

While shut out from their family and loved ones in isolation, many long-term care residents began suffering from depression, extreme loneliness, and a major decline in mental and physical health. It is the injustice of this century that this is going unaddressed by Congress.

Since introducing the Essential Caregivers Act, we have started a coalition of passionate and tenacious fighters across the country. It is the Essential Caregivers Movement.

With me today, I have a book authored by Karla Abraham-Conley, an amazing constituent of mine who also was prohibited from providing the needed care for her mother because of negligent policies in place by our former Governor. This is her great book. It is absolutely beautiful. "Protecting Them to Death" is the title.

Folded into each page of Karla's book are harrowing stories from individuals who either lost a loved one in a long-term care facility or witnessed from a distance as their loved ones suffered from serious declines in their mental and physical health.

These are not just the stories of New Yorkers. These are accounts from all across the Nation as you go through each part of this book. I could flip every page of this book and tell you a story from every single State. They are heartbreaking. They are cruel. Most importantly, they motivate those with the power and responsibility to make a meaningful change for our future.

When I see this book, I see the ways our laws have failed our constituents. I see the pain, but I also see the opportunity on every page, a chance for this Congress to stand up on behalf of these hurting Americans and boldly say: I will act. I will defend your rights as an essential caregiver.

Before I close, I would like to share an excerpt from Karla's personal story. "I was my mother's essential caregiver every single day prior to the lockdown. Suddenly, I wasn't there anymore, and she was incapable of understanding why."

Karla continues by saying her mother "was left to die alone in her bed, and not from COVID-19. She said to me via a virtual visit, 'Get me outta here. They're going to kill me,' which is exactly what happened."

When Karla was shut off from her mother, her mother's state of health rapidly declined. Karla's mother developed sepsis, renal failure, high sodium levels, swelling of the brain, and other symptoms that went unnoticed. After Karla fought tooth and nail to admit her mother to the emergency room, her mother passed away a week later.

Mr. Speaker, what you have heard is unacceptable by all standards, but it is just one of thousands of stories I wanted to share.

I thank Karla and so many essential caregivers, including our own VoicesForSeniors, another advocacy group in New York State, for sharing this dark chapter in their lives.

Not many people can turn grief into action and start a nationwide movement. Yet, in a time of incredible sadness and loss, so many strong men and women chose to stand up and do just that. I applaud their courage, their bravery, and their tenacity in this fight. I introduced the Essential Caregivers Act for each of them and their loved ones.

Mr. Speaker, I am honored to lead this fight in Congress, but I am not leading it alone. I am joined by our colleagues from both sides of the aisle, including the bill's cosponsor and co-lead, Congressman JOHN LARSON of Connecticut. We are so grateful for his advocacy as well.

Mr. Speaker, I urge more of my colleagues to join us to pass this bill, to make it a reality and help these people who are advocating across the Nation to protect those who could be in this jeopardy in the future. I will remain committed to this fight for so many families who were forced to comply with the careless policies that prevented them from caring for their loved ones.

BENEFITS FOR BURN PIT-EXPOSED
VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. ESPAILLAT). The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California (Mr. RUIZ) for 5 minutes.

Mr. RUIZ. Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of my bill, the Burn Pit Registry

Enhancement Act, which passed the House unanimously yesterday, and to urge a vote in the Senate.

The Burn Pit Registry Enhancement Act would strengthen the registry by allowing a registered veteran's data to be updated by their family with his or her cause of death.

This data is crucial to identify the vast array of illnesses that are causing young burn pit-exposed veterans to die and will help doctors recognize early symptoms of life-threatening conditions and save lives.

As a Nation, we have a responsibility to provide our veterans with the benefits they have earned and deserve. We bear that responsibility even more heavily when the use of burn pits by our own military is causing veterans to develop rare pulmonary conditions and cancers.

Mr. Speaker, I urge the Senate to take up my legislation and uphold our commitment to taking care of our veterans.

ALEJANDRO CAMACHO'S STORY

Mr. RUIZ. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to tell the story of my constituent, Alejandro Camacho, of Palm Desert, a veteran who has been affected by our military's use of toxic burn pits, and to call for action.

After graduating from La Quinta High School, Alejandro served our Nation in the U.S. Marine Corps. From March to September 2009, he was stationed in south Sinjar, Iraq.

At great personal sacrifice to himself, Alejandro served as a member of the 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, even missing the birth of his own son, Jacob, while he was stationed overseas.

Every single day in south Sinjar, Alejandro breathed in toxic fumes, particulate matter, and carcinogens from the batteries, medical waste, and jet fuel that was burned in large burn pits on his base.

When he returned home, the effects of breathing in those toxic fumes started taking a toll on his body. In 2019, Alejandro was diagnosed with embryonal carcinoma, an aggressive form of testicular cancer. He and his doctor believed his diagnosis to be linked to his exposures to fumes from burning jet propulsion 8 fuel, a known human carcinogen.

When Alejandro underwent the excruciating chemotherapy process, his body fell apart. He lost 50 pounds. He lost feeling in his hands and feet, and he constantly heard ringing in his ears.

Despite being deemed 40 percent disabled, despite his repeated exposure to jet fuel fumes, and despite the diagnosis, the VA denied his claim for coverage. Do you know why? Because the VA said there wasn't "enough evidence" to establish a connection between his burn pit exposure and the cancer he developed.

Mr. Speaker, I am an emergency medicine physician and a public health expert, and in public health and in medicine, it is practice that if there is